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Issue #330

December 2016

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# Selling accessible real estate

*It started as a mission to help out his aunt and led to Jeffrey Kerr's niche as an expert in barrier-free, accessible real estate.* By Susan Doran

When the date to move into the Toronto condo apartment she'd purchased pre-construction finally arrived, Jeffrey Kerr's aunt, who had multiple sclerosis, manoeuvred her wheelchair through the door and looked around with growing alarm.

It did not take her long to realize that the unit, which she had been assured was wheelchair accessible, was actually anything but. She knew she would not be able to live there.

She made the decision to sell the condo immediately and asked Kerr for help. A sales rep with Re/Max Unique in Toronto, he was happy to come to his aunt's aid. He began to research the opportunities available for buyers and sellers of accessible properties.

That's how he stumbled upon the discovery that accessible housing, while very much in demand, is largely under-serviced by the real estate industry in the Greater Toronto Area and in many other markets as well.

"I spoke with the organization that is now Spinal Cord Injury Ontario, and they strongly encouraged me to become involved with their membership as there was such a need for real estate agents who understood the challenges of the accessible housing market," Kerr says.

"Referrals started coming in immediately from them and from other organizations. That was 13 years ago."

So he can thank his aunt (and let's not overlook the influence of his mother, a retired physiotherapist), for steering him into a very specific niche market.

"A lot of agents position themselves as community experts, but I'm a disability expert," he says. "My goal is to connect buyers and sellers in this speciality niche. It gives me a lot of personal satisfaction. I still love the 'ah-ha'

moment when someone realizes that I exist, a specialist in barrier-free real estate who can meet their unique needs."

A prolific writer on the topic of accessibility, Kerr recently had a book published titled *Barrier Free Real Estate: Achieving Freedom at Home*.

He explains in the book that a barrier-free, accessible house or condo "is a home where anyone with a mobility challenge – for example a child in a wheelchair; an adult with vision problems, or a senior with a walker – can live comfortably and safely" without their movements being restricted by elements such as the home's architecture, layout or features.

Despite his expertise in this segment of the market, Kerr – like the rest of us – sometimes struggles with the terminology, he admits.

"A lot of people don't like the word 'disability.' I am very conscious of the terms I use and I ask if they are acceptable. The best advice I can give to real estate agents is to get to know your clients and take your cues from them."

Kerr has been a sales rep with Re/Max Unique for over 17 years – his entire real estate career. He has his broker's license and has thought about setting up accessible housing training in order to share his expertise with other agents, as he has found the available training limited.

"Agents get parachuted in and don't know how to help," he says.

They might want to consider finding a way to get up to speed. Today with the aging baby boomer population causing what some researchers refer to as 'a tsunami of seniors,' the need for accessible housing is on the rise, with demand far exceeding supply, Kerr says.

In his opinion demand is becoming unprecedented, particularly since retirement

homes and assisted living facilities are in short supply and increasingly baby boomers are opting to age in place in their own homes.

Kerr says that his clientele comprises "a fairly broad group," including people with mobility challenges looking to buy or sell existing retrofitted homes or renovate to suit their requirements, as well as those looking for wheelchair accessible rentals. He does a lot of work with various local facilities for those with mobility issues (including the Toronto Rehabilitation Institute), where he is part of the team determining and securing suitable housing options for those "who have had a motor vehicle or other accident that has changed their lives dramatically," he explains.

In other cases his clients may have "a progressive disability such as MS," or they may be families with children whose disabilities are no longer manageable in their current home, Kerr says.

"Maybe when the kids were small they could be carried up and down stairs. But kids grow, and that is often when I get brought in."

Although accessible housing options are improving, in Toronto and many other cities there is still a shortage of well-built and affordable accessible accommodations, says Kerr.

The upshot is that he often winds up talking himself out of a job... although he is confident "it will come back to me," he says.

"It's a question of helping clients make the decision that's best for them and giving them options," he says. "I empower clients to live on their own terms and not to be forced out of their homes due to mobility challenges such as not being able to get up stairs."

Often he can offer suggestions for "easy modifications" – a new



Jeffrey Kerr (Photo by Marko Shark)

bathroom, an entrance ramp, a chair glide for getting upstairs, an elevator – so they can continue to live at home for many years, he says.

He leaves doing the actual modifications "to the experts," while pointing his clients in the direction that works for them. This may also involve helping clients connect with appropriate agencies and services.

Increasingly he finds himself doing this type of consulting with clients, while unsure yet exactly how to incorporate it into his business plan financially.

"It's part of my evolving business, of where I am positioning myself," he muses. "I like to be a great resource for my clients."

To this end, he obtained a Master Accredited Senior Agent designation from the Academy of Seniors Real Estate in Toronto.

A lot of agents unfamiliar with the accessible housing market will advise clients to tear out

accessibility features before they sell. Kerr does not. Instead, he targets the right buyer, he says.

Accessibility modifications "will maintain value and actually increase it to the right buyer," he says. "It comes down to networking."

His advice is for agents to do their research, call appropriate organizations in the area and ask if any of their members are looking for an accessible home.

There is something else that sets Kerr and his specialty niche apart, and that's that they may have significant insulation from market fluctuations.

Accessible housing purchases and sales are "not market driven, but rather are circumstance driven," particularly in regards to personal injury clients, Kerr says.

"So to a large degree, I am not as concerned with the ebbs and flows of the marketplace, as my clients are making a move whatever the market is doing." ■ REM